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Urbanisation in Peninsular Malaysia

Dr Manjit Singh Sidhu

DEFINITE urbanisation in Peninsular Malaysia started several centuries ago with the founding of Malacca in 1402. Since then the level of urbanisation has remained modest.

The foundations of modern urbanisation were laid with the coming of the colonial economy, beginning in the middle of the 19th century when Chinese and Indian immigrants were encouraged to migrate to the Malay Peninsula to work on the tin mines and rubber plantations. Tin and rubber emerged as the twin pillars of the peninsula's economy by the early 20th century.

Many towns that emerged along the west coast initially started as tin mining villages. Those that lay at focal points became State capitals, for example, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Seremban, etc. Others emerged as district headquarters, for example, Batu Gajah, Kampar, Kajang, etc.

Urbanisation progressed but at a slow pace. The urban index was 14 per cent at the time of the first unified census taken in 1921. At the time of independence in 1957, it had risen to 26.5 per cent.

With the intensification of industrialisation over the last two decades, the pace of urbanisation quickened. By 1980, the urban index had increased to 37 per cent, and by 1991 it jumped to 54 per cent.

With the exception of the city state of Singapore, Malaysia was the only Southeast Asian country to have more than half of its population living in urban areas in 1991. Britain was the world's first to achieve this in 1800 with a 50 per cent urban population.

At the same time, the number of towns (with a population of 10,000 and above) in the peninsula increased from 14 in 1921 to 36 in 1957 and 112 in 1991.

The other major salient feature of Peninsular Malaysia's urbanisation has been the contrast between the largely rural Malays and the more urbanised immigrants, especially the Chinese. Barely five per cent of the Malays were urban in 1921 whereas the figure for urban Chinese was 28 per cent.

At independence, barely 10 per cent of the Malays were urban while 45 per cent of the Chinese were urbanised; at the last census, held in 1991, the Malay urban proportion had risen to 41 per cent while the Chinese urban proportion had advanced to more than 70 per cent. The Indian urban proportion too has been consistently higher than the Malay urban proportion, though less than the Chinese urban proportion; the Indian urban index in 1921 was 16 per cent and by 1991 it had risen to 60 per cent.

One major significant change occurred over the years. The Chinese had dominated the peninsula's urban population for a long period; up to 1980, they formed over half the urban population. By 1991, the Malays had overtaken the Chinese in numbers and formed 46 per cent of the urban population whereas the Chinese share fell to 40 per cent. The remainder of the urban population was formed by Indians and others.

By the time the country achieves Vision 2020 (that is, in a little over two decades from now), the urban population will undergo major shifts. Firstly, more than two-thirds of the population will be urban.

Secondly, the Malays would form 67 per cent of the total urban population; besides their urban index would have crossed the 50 per cent level.

The Chinese would continue to dominate the old Central Business

Districts (CBD) in most cities but would face stiff competition from the Malays.

The Chinese urban population would increase slowly compared with the rapid Malay urban population increase. This is because the Chinese rural reservoir is small whereas the Malay rural reservoir remains large. Besides, the Chinese birth rates, already low at present, would decline further whereas the Malay birth rates, relatively high at present, would go down but rather slowly. The Chinese and Indians would form barely one-third of the urban population by the year 2020.

Besides Kuala Lumpur, there would be at least another two or possibly five other cities with a population of one million and above. The potential "millionaire" cities are Ipoh, Johor Baru, Klang, Petaling Jaya and Kuantan.

The Klang Valley conurbation would contain at least two-fifths of the country's urban population. The Johor Baru, George Town-Butterworth-Prai, Ipoh and Kuantan conurbations would together form another third of the country's urban population.

The rest of the urban population would be found dispersed largely in the smaller conurbations (formed around the State capitals) and other towns. This would ensure that the bulk of the urban population will be located in the big and smaller conurbations.

Towns and cities with a population of more than 100,000 would contain between 80 and 90 per cent of the region's urban population. The majority of the population would be engaged in the manufacturing and services sectors.

Provided there is no major world economic recession - such as the one experienced in the 1930s - the total population in Peninsular Malaysia would double itself; it would be in the region of 30 million by the year 2020.

The urban population would increase more rapidly as compared with the rural population (urban areas would also attract immigrants from rural areas besides enjoying natural increase). Therefore, the urban population would be quite large, numbering roughly around 20 million.

Malaysia will continue to be one of the most urbanised and industrialised countries not only in Southeast Asia but also in the whole of Asia.

Nonetheless, increased urbanisation will lead to problems that in some ways will resemble those facing the highly urbanised countries of Western Europe. Pollution and traffic jams will be experienced not only in the Klang Valley but will spread to all the other major conurbations. Transportation both within cities and that connecting cities will have to be improved.

The north-south railway line will have to be made into a dual track like the one now in operation between Kuala Lumpur and Rawang. Before long, the present North-South Expressway will have to be widened. This is already being done in some stretches (for example, Seremban-Kuala Lumpur and the Kuala Lumpur-Klang sections).

With the increase in urban population, there will be more high-rise flats to provide accommodation for the large urban population. Some of the high-rise flats already in existence will become dilapidated by 2020. In fact, there are many high-rise flats that were built not so long ago, that are now being abandoned as these are found to be unsafe for occupation.

Owing to land scarcity in urban areas, at least half of the urban population, especially the not-so-well-off, will be forced to live in flats. The majority of the flats will be built to accommodate the poor and the lower middle class urban dwellers. Luxury apartments to cater for the rich will also become a common sight.

As cities expand, new housing estates come up. Nowadays, a majority of the housing estates are being built by giant corporations that initially started as plantation companies.

Sime Darby's division, Sime UEP, is building virtually new "townships" around Kuala Lumpur on former plantation areas belonging to the group. Kumpulan Guthrie is also doing the same.

Another group to have been active in building urban homes are the various State Economic Development Corporations, the investment arms of State Governments. The individual housing developers, usually Chinese, find it difficult to compete with these giant corporations.

The growth of cities will inevitably lead to major problems of rubbish collection and disposal. Since open burning by municipal and town councils is discouraged, other safe but not so expensive methods of rubbish disposal will have to be resorted to by the authorities.

Pollution will inevitably increase. The frequent haze over the Klang Valley will become probably worse.

One of the consequences of urbanisation is that as urban dwellers' contacts widen they tend to become impersonal, superficial, transitory and segmental, as pointed out by urban sociologist Louis Wirth.

In Malaysia, it has been pointed out that the city folk generally tend to be sombong (snobbish). This is true to a large extent. Many residents of large towns do not know the people in their neighbourhood. Everyone is busy going to work early in the morning and they return home late. On Sundays, they go shopping or visit friends living in another part of the city.

Close friendships among neighbours are rare, and when these occur they tend to be forged among members of the same ethnic group. Consequently, when there are long festive holidays, there tends to be an exodus (from all races), returning to their hometowns. This is largely because a significant proportion of city dwellers have only superficial relationships in the city and often long to return to their relatives and friends whenever they find several public holidays falling together, especially Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, Christmas, and so on.

There is increasing incidence of families breaking up in urban areas, especially in the Klang Valley. This occurs largely because contact among family members has become less and less.

Religious and moral values get eroded in urban areas, especially in large cities. This phenomenon is not unique to Malaysia, but is to be found in most urbanised societies in all continents.

Perhaps, the two-day weekly holiday introduced by the Kelantan Government has some merit: it stresses that one day should be devoted to prayers and another for the family to be together; nonetheless, it depends on the people as to how they want to spend their weekends.

The best our leaders can hope for is that traditional Asian values will be cherished and practised by both the rural and urban folk.

A glance at Singapore, once part of Malaysia, reveals that despite its success as a modern, clean and almost crime free, urbanised society, the leaders have to remind their citizens time and again to be polite and courteous while maintaining their thrust of being efficient and innovative in order to remain ahead of their neighbours who are also progressing rapidly and pose competition to Singapore.

As the declared aim of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Government is that industrialisation (it means de facto urbanisation) is the only way for Malaysia, one must accept the fact that once the forces of industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation are in an advanced state, there can be no looking back to the past - and pining for old values - when a large majority of the inhabitants was rural.

Urbanisation will inevitably produce a contrast between the urban and rural types - the "city slicker" and the "country yokel".
Associate Professor
Universiti Utara Malaysia
Sintok

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